

# FOSTERING NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO SCRIPTURE IN ASIA: THE PRIMARY TASK OF EXPLICIT RECOGNITION\*

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## ABSTRACT

In similar breath with other articles in this issue, Ma. Marilou S. Ibita argues that the recognition and retrieval of distinctive Asian narrative approaches to biblical interpretation, which integrates Asian worldviews and cultures, can contribute to the enrichment of Asian hermeneutics and theology.

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Where the *kwento* [story] is still being told, it continues to possess the power of bringing people together. For the *kwento* in its disarming simplicity is replete with the symbols and values of the race which resonates with the people whenever it is told.<sup>1</sup>

Storytelling in Asia is part and parcel of everyday life. Theologians and pastoral workers could relive the experience of researchers when they approach people in their churches or parishes. Although probably steeped in (mostly Western) theological training, they might find themselves asking logical and analytical questions about the people's faith and beliefs and get a story for an answer.<sup>2</sup>

What happens, then, when people in Asia who are fond of storytelling meet the Bible? How are the biblical stories interpreted by storytelling people like Asians? Do they, perhaps, find themselves resonating with the richness of the biblical stories? Or are they alienated? How do their stories impact on the biblical stories?

In this paper, we will center on the need to consider narrative approaches and methodologies in Asian biblical interpretation, with a special but not exclusive focus on the Roman Catholic Church. We will do this by considering first the situation in Asia when the Bible came to the continent. The use of Asian indigenous interpretive tools such as narrative approaches was discouraged then. This resulted in the non-recognition and neglect of Asian biblical interpretation and the consideration of the Western approach as normative. We will next describe and underscore the task of articulating the preferred hermeneutical processes for biblical interpretation in the region, particularly in

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1. Teresita B. Obusan, "A *Hiyang* Approach," in *Pamamaraan: Indigenous Knowledge and Evolving Research Paradigms*, edited by Teresita B. Obusan and Angelina R. Enriquez (Quezon City: Asian Center, 1994), 97–98.
  2. *Ibid.*, 93.

view of narrative approaches and methodologies,<sup>3</sup> as part of the bigger mission of Asian theologizing.<sup>4</sup>

## Non-recognition and Neglect of Asian Narrative Interpretation

Maria Ko presents the challenges concerning inculturation and the Scriptures<sup>5</sup> by starting to look back at the foundation of Christian churches in Asia. She points out a significant observation that “the great epoch of evangelization in Asia, between the 1600s and 1800s, coincided with the rigid period of the Counter-reformation.”<sup>6</sup> This resulted in the catechism being more important than the Bible, coupled by the prevailing mentality of the missionaries that Scripture can only be read with special care by a few, and access to it

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3. We follow here the terminology of Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 111, on the use of the following terms: “A *method* is a particular procedure, for example, statistical word analysis, used to generate a particular type of information. *Methodology* refers to the overall structure and systematic interrelated functioning of a collection of particular methods (e.g., narrative analysis or structuralist analysis) that implement (some part of) an approach (e.g., literary) to the text. I use the term *approach* to refer to a characteristic way of addressing/interrogating a text (e.g., a basically historical, or literary, or theological approach), which involves an articulated methodology or group of methodologies that in turn govern the role of particular methods.” We hold that one can interpret the biblical text using narrative approaches (a characteristic way of addressing the text) and different kinds of narrative methodologies depending on the biblical texts being studied such as the narratives in the Torah, the Gospels, and more recently, the letters of Paul. The latter is still mostly confined in Anglo-Saxon academic circles. See for example the works of Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983); Norman Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul’s Narrative World* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985); Bruce Longenecker, ed., *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville, KY/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001) to name a few.
  4. Here, we are aware of the debate on what could be described as Asian theology. We continue to have the pressing questions of who could do Asian theology: Is it only Asians on the continent or also Asians who are not on the continent? What about non-Asians who have served the church in Asia? Likewise, what would geographically constitute Asia in view of Asian theology?
  5. Maria Ko, “Scripture,” in James H. Kroeger, *FABC Papers No. 115: Inculturation in Asia: Directions, Initiatives, and Options*, available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-115.htm>, accessed April 15, 2009.
  6. Ibid. For a detailed overview of biblical introduction and interpretation in Asia and other colonial settings, see R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

mediated by clergy either in the pastoral or liturgical setting.<sup>7</sup> Ko describes the consequence of this: “Therefore, from its very beginning in Asia, the Catholic Church was known more for its magnificent organizational structures and efficiency, works of charity, splendid churches, great missionary figures, European style of religious practices, and less for its spirituality and sacred books.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the reaction against the reformation’s thrust towards the possibility of everyone being able to interpret the Bible resulted in the non-recognition of the peoples’ contribution for biblical interpretation. For Ko, considering the context of the Asian continent, the cradle of the world’s many other religions that put so much value on their own scriptures, this lack of strong identification and familiarity with the Bible perhaps accounts for the limited spread of Christianity in Asia.<sup>9</sup>

Negligence in acknowledging and appreciating Asian ways of biblical interpretation can also be observed in the history of biblical interpretation in Asia, as R. S. Sugirtharajah opines.<sup>10</sup> He says: “The efforts of Asian and African and Latin American thinkers during the colonial period and later are either ignored or seen as not worthy of any serious attention by western biblical scholars. There is a tendency to overlook the long tradition of biblical interpretation.”<sup>11</sup>

This tendency to overlook the long tradition of Asian biblical interpretation continues in different ecclesial contexts especially in theological reflections and the training of future servant-leaders in the church. As Moonjang Lee observes in relation to theology in Asia in general, “A ready-made theology was delivered to Asian people and this discouraged local Christians from developing methods of doing theology with local resources.”<sup>12</sup> More in line with New Testament interpretation, we find this critique of J. G. Muthuraj

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7. Ko, “Scripture.”

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid. She says: “For Asian peoples, however, religious literature is much more important than any Westerner could imagine. All great Asian religions can boast of sacred books with elevated teaching and refined philosophy. The spread of a religion depends very much on the diffusion of its Scriptures. The spread of Buddhism in China is a witness to this. Even within the Catholic Church there is a significant example: the foundation of Christianity in Korea was not laid by foreign missionaries, but by the study of Christian books brought into the country from China by Korean converts.”

10. R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Critics, Tools and the Global Arena,” in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 49–60.

11. Ibid., 58.

12. Moonjang Lee, “Identifying an Asian Theology: A Methodological Quest,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 13/2 (1999): 263.

concerning the limitation of Indian students' independent exegetical exercise, "They are not willing to find out the meaning for themselves and a short-cut is usually followed by reproducing what the commentaries say the meaning of the text is."<sup>13</sup> To help us not to lose sight of the noteworthy efforts by Asians and to encourage continued strivings, it is good to bear in mind some of Sugirtharajah's examples of how Asians have attempted to interpret the Bible:

[Even] long before Albert Schweitzer embarked on the modern search for the historical Jesus, Raja Rammohun Roy was engaged in such a task, although he did not identify his investigation in those terms. In his *Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness* (1820), employing his own version of reader response criticism which is currently in vogue in biblical scholarship, he was indeed searching for a historical Jesus who was a moral guide. Hong Xiuquan's rework of Mark's gospel during the Taiping revolution; Matsumura Kaiseke's editing out of canonical material and the production of his own version known as Dokkai Bible.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of neglect, coupled with the lack of recognition of Asian biblical ways of interpretation, led to a diminished appreciation and eventually failure to maximize the usage of Asian biblical hermeneutics in the pastoral and academic settings. The combined effects of these factors are present both outside Asia and within Asia:

Unfortunately, the efforts of these people were not seen as sophisticated enough to be studied within biblical disciplines, but were relegated to church history, mission studies or practical theology and not offered their proper place in biblical studies. My intention is not to be triumphalistic and say that we in the Third World attempted all these hermeneutical pursuits, but to serve as a reminder that there is a long tradition of biblical discourse which has been eclipsed not only by the dominant biblical scholarship in the West but sadly also by our Third World theological institutions.<sup>15</sup>

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13. G. Muthuraj, "Re-reading NT in India: Some Hermeneutical Explorations," *Asia Journal of Theology* 13/1 (1999): 27. We note, nevertheless, that this paper is indebted to a lot of Western insights and also presents several ways of dealing with the "meeting of the East and West in NT Hermeneutics" on pp. 19–23 such as F. S. C. Northrop (East and West are meeting and merging), A. Pieris (a participatory approach for East and West), R. Panikkar (East and West are in each of us) and S. Radhakrishnan (we can speak across continents).

14. Sugirtharajah, "Critics, Tools and the Global Arena," 58.

15. Ibid.

A similar lack of recognition of Asian exegetical methods is echoed in a workshop discussion guide, prepared by Jacob Theckanath, for the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' Seventh Plenary Assembly in 2000. He critiques the current situation in Asia where the use of the historical-critical method predominates, and this has resulted also in the loss of appreciation of the other aspects of the Word.<sup>16</sup> He said, "Asian exegetical methods were not even envisaged as coming within the scope of the academic discipline of Biblical study."<sup>17</sup>

## Asian Narrative Ways of Biblical Interpretation: The Task of Retrieval and Recognition

The unfortunate marginalization of the Asian hermeneutical approaches and methodologies we mentioned above needs to be addressed. The changes after Vatican II favored redressing the issue since they allowed Christians in Asia to read and learn from their own Scriptures.

Christians in Asia discover the marvels of the Bible. They realize with surprise that it is very near to their own mentality, their way of thinking and of expressing themselves. They feel at home with its narrative style, parables and metaphors, concise oracles of the prophets, poetic prayers, and especially its wisdom reflections.<sup>18</sup>

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16. Jacob Theckanath, "The Asian Image of Jesus: Theological, Biblical, Catechetical & Liturgical Renewal," available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-92q.htm>, accessed March 27, 2009. This paper was made for the discussion of the theme: "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service," The Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, held in January 3–12, 2000 in Bangkok, Samphan, Thailand.
  17. Ibid. Moreover, he laments the other effects of this in view of a more integral appreciation of the Word of God in relation to spirituality and transformation. He comments, "As a result the mystery dimension of the word was diluted. The objectification of the word also contributed to the loss of the sense of being claimed by the word. A certain form of domestication and privatisation of the word also became a feature of spirituality. Its power for transformation of life and society was not experienced." For an overview of the contemporary methods of biblical criticism that show the trend from historical criticism to literary criticism to cultural criticism and the most recent cultural studies that are more considerate of non-Western interpretations, see Fernando F. Segovia, "Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as Mode of Discourse," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, edited by Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 1–20, and his more elaborate discussion in Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 3–86.
  18. Ko, "Scripture."

A lot of hard work has been going on, especially after the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, founded in 1970,<sup>19</sup> which clearly promise to develop a theology that is indigenous to the continent.

We pledge ourselves to develop an indigenous theology and to do what we can so that the life and message of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historic cultures of Asia, so that in the necessary process of modernization and development, Asian Christianity may help to promote all that is "authentically human in these cultures."<sup>20</sup>

This pledge "to develop an indigenous theology" is steadily being nourished in so many and diverse ways and impacts on the biblical hermeneutical needs in Asia. Examples of developing homegrown theologies are found in the varied fora, such as the FABC and in the local churches themselves, where theological reflections are discussed. One of the most basic tenets in developing this indigenous theology is to bear in mind the particular relationship of the preaching of the Gospel<sup>21</sup> in dialogue with the cultures, religions and the poor

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19. For comments on the role of the FABC in theologizing in Asia, see Felix Wilfred, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientation, Challenges and Impact," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, edited by Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, and Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), xxiii–xxx. See also Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan, "Theologizing at the Service of Life: The Contextual Theological Methodology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences," in *FABC Papers* No. 108 (2003): 1 (1–34 pp.); also available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-108.htm>, access May 8, 2009; Michael Amaladoss, "Is there an Asian Way of Doing Theology," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 45/3 (2008): 10–27, especially p. 12: "The Asian identity has been further fostered by the formation, thirty years ago, of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC, Catholic) and the Christian Council of Asia (CCA, Protestant). This has led to a common point of view and shared theologizing."
  20. Asian Bishops' Meeting, "Meeting and Resolutions of the Asian Bishops' Meeting," Resolution No. 13, in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, edited by Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, and Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 9.
  21. Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC, "Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context," *FABC Papers* 60 (1991): 1–59, especially 6–7. After five years of study and consultation (1986–1990), the TAC presented this document, which discussed fifteen theses about the local church and clarified terms that are very important in our present study, especially "Gospel," "Culture," and "Local Church." For the TAC, the term "Gospel" is "good news" (*evangelion*), reflecting the OT and NT meanings of "to announce salvation" (Is 40:1f), "liberation" (Is 61:1f) and "the coming of the Kingdom of God" (Is 52:7). This is so identified with Jesus who came preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of Life to the point that the Gospel is also identified with Jesus himself. It is a Gospel which is both Word and Witness, as the Johannine gospel attests. As preached by Paul, the Gospel is also the power of God's salvation, the grace of forgiveness,

in Asia<sup>22</sup> and in the ecclesial context of the Church of the Poor.<sup>23</sup> This dialogue takes place in the context of a “pastoral spiral.” The pastoral spiral involves a sequential series of actions: from a particular reality → sharing of experiences → analysis of causes → reflection in faith → decision-making → planning → action → evaluation → having a new reality → after which, the spiral continues anew.<sup>24</sup> The fourth aspect of the pastoral spiral, “reflection in faith,”

and a gift of the Spirit to the early Christian community. Gospel is also a mystery, the expression of the divine plan of salvation, revealed and realized in and through Jesus and affects the whole cosmos for the fullness of time. Jesus embodied and manifested this Gospel in his preaching, lifestyle and commitment. After his death and resurrection, Christ became a living and life-giving Spirit so that the Gospel embodied in him became a power for those who believe in truth, freedom and justice, which all bear witness to the presence of the Kingdom.

22. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia,” Statement and Recommendations of the First Plenary Assembly held in Taipei, Taiwan April 27, 1974, in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, edited by Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, and Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 11–25, especially 13–16, nos. 6–28 and 23, no. III. 20. In the same volume, we also find this reflected in the “Letter of Participants of the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate to the Bishops of Asia in 1978,” 94, nos. 9–11; “Message of the Delegates Consensus Papers of the Workshops on the occasion of the International Congress on Mission in 1979,” 127, no. 19; as well as the consensus papers on inculturation (138–41), other religious traditions (141–43), and the Gospel, the Kingdom of God, Liberation and Development (143–48), esp. on the Church of the Poor (144–45).
23. See Asian Bishops' Meeting, “Meeting and Resolutions of the Asian Bishops' Meeting,” no. 19, in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, edited by Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, and Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 3–10, especially 5: “It is our resolve, first of all, to be more truly ‘the Church of the Poor.’ If we are to place ourselves at the side of the multitudes in our continent, we must in our way of life share something of their poverty. The Church cannot set up islands of affluence in a sea of want and misery; our own personal lives must give witness to evangelical simplicity, and no man [*sic*] no matter how lowly or poor, should find it hard to come to us and find in us their brothers [and sisters].” See also *FABC Papers* No. 28: 4. This thrust is reiterated in the thirtieth anniversary of the FABC where becoming a Church of the Poor is articulated as the first among the eight movements of renewal of the Church in Asia. See “A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service,” The Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences held in Samphran, Thailand, January 3–12, 2000, *FABC Papers* No. 93: available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-93.htm>, accessed May 8, 2009.
24. See *FABC Papers* No. 92n (2000), available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-92n.htm>, accessed April 15, 2009. An accompanying diagrammatic explanation of the “pastoral spiral” is also found in this document. For a more detailed explanation of the Pastoral Spiral, see Orlando Quevedo, “Asian Realities and Cultures: Their Implications to Education,” in *Proceedings of a Colloquium on Education in Asia: Toward a Formation-Oriented Education*, edited by Vicente Cajilig (Manila: UST Printing Office, 1993), 7–20, especially 8–9, 19–20. Akin to this, Arturo M. Bastes, “The Present Trends of the Biblical Apostolate” *The ICST Journal* 7 (2005): 16–31, 23–24, explains a



beckons a participative biblical interpretation which can certainly benefit from a narrative approach. Narrative approaches and methodologies complement the pastoral spiral.<sup>25</sup>

The task of recognizing Asian biblical hermeneutics has reached the Church's leadership in Rome especially after the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia.<sup>26</sup> Pope John Paul II in his post-synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, expresses the need to evangelize in ways that are not foreign to Asia such as employing narrative methodologies. He says: "In general, narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. In fact, the proclamation of Jesus Christ can most effectively be made by narrating his story, as the Gospels do."<sup>27</sup> As we have seen this "endorsement" from the Pope does not come from a vacuum. It is a result of a long process of recognizing Asian

"biblical-pastoral cycle" which has four steps, namely socio-pastoral situationer, social analysis, theological reflection (where engagement with the biblical text plays its role), and pastoral action.

25. See *FABC Papers* No. 92n (2000), *Opening Paths to Life through Education*, Workshop Discussion Guide (2 parts), written by Lourdes J. Custodio, "Towards the Formation of Christian Values Today," and Luc Van Looy, "Youth Ministry in Asia," at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-92n.htm>, accessed March 27, 2009. Custodio and Van Looy both recommend narrative ministry and Bible ministry. Van Looy, a Belgian missionary who has worked extensively in Korea and has mastered the Korean language, recognizes the different ways of reading the Bible – historical, dogmatic, or literary – and proposes an educative-pastoral reading. In this, participants look for life models in the biblical stories of encounters with Jesus. Starting from their own experience, they then confront and evaluate their own life in the light of the figures and the processes in the said biblical stories.
26. This was held in Rome, April 19–May 14, 1998. The final document of this gathering was John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, issued on November 6, 1999, in New Delhi, India. For the complete documentation of the Synod, see [http://www.ewtn.com/new\\_evangelization/asia/synod/index.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/new_evangelization/asia/synod/index.htm), accessed April 15, 2009.
27. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 20, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_06111999\\_ecclesia-in-asia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia_en.html), accessed April 15, 2009. The pope continues to say: "The presentation of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour needs to follow a *pedagogy* which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery. Clearly, the initial evangelization of non-Christians and the continuing proclamation of Jesus to believers will have to be different in their approach. In initial proclamation, for example, 'the presentation of Jesus Christ could come as the fulfilment of the yearnings expressed in the mythologies and folklore of the Asian peoples.' In general, narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. In fact, the proclamation of Jesus Christ can most effectively be made by narrating his story, as the Gospels do. The ontological notions involved, which must always be presupposed and expressed in presenting Jesus, can be complemented by more relational, historical and even cosmic perspectives. The Church, the Synod Fathers noted, must be open to the new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia." For a critical evaluation of *Ecclesia in Asia*, see James Kroeger and Peter C. Phan, eds., *The Future of the Asian Churches: The Asian Synod and Ecclesia in Asia* (Quezon City: Claretian, 2002), especially Michael Amaladoss, "Ecclesia in Asia: An Asian Document?," 115–17, where Amaladoss observes that inculturation has been raised in *Ecclesia in Asia* not from the context of dialogue, which is crucial in Asia, but from the viewpoint of proclamation. Hence, "The exhortation is a document for Asia. It is not an Asian document. It is not the voice of Asia. The tone and style are very un-Asian."

hermeneutics as legitimate. Corollary to this is the need for explicit articulation of Asian biblical approaches and methodologies, such as a narrative way, and its explicit recognition, even if it is already considered indigenous.

The post-synodal exhortation of John Paul II takes up the recommendation of the Synod that subsequent catechesis should follow “an evocative pedagogy, using stories, parables and symbols so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching.”<sup>28</sup> In *Ecclesia in Asia*, §20, one glimpses a bit of the long-standing background work for explicit recognition and articulation. The encyclical also cites the *Instrumentum Laboris* for Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, §27: “. . . one of many ways of doing this, in a particularly Asiatic manner, would be through the use of stories and parables coming from the Bible.”<sup>29</sup>

But the challenge of recognizing and using Asian biblical hermeneutics remains a task for Asian theologians, especially those engaged in vocational and professional biblical interpretation. Although there are more basic needs, like making the Bible more available to people and its accompanying challenges,<sup>30</sup> employing various approaches and methods of biblical hermeneutics, especially narrative ways of biblical interpretation, remains an imperative in the Asian setting.

Many follow-ups on Asian narrative ways can be found in the documents after the Synod and *Ecclesia in Asia*. One of these is the synopsis of the workshops of the FABC Assembly in 2000, which summarizes the challenges concerning the Asian image of Jesus in relation to biblical, theological, catechetical, and liturgical renewal.<sup>31</sup> This document underscores the significance of being sensitive to Asian hermeneutical preferences:

28. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 20.

29. Synod of Bishops, “Jesus Christ the Saviour and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: . . . ‘That They May Have Life, and Have It Abundantly’ (Jn 10:10),” *Instrumentum Laboris*, No. 27, available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20021998\\_asia-instrlabor\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20021998_asia-instrlabor_en.html), accessed April 15, 2009.

30. See Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC, “Theses on the Local Church,” 53, where TAC cites the need to make the Bible available to people. To actualize this proposal, the TAC suggests the following: giving it free to those who cannot afford it; making the Bible available in the language(s) of the people; teaching the people to appreciate the cultural context of the biblical message and the distinction of its content from the cultural expression found in the text, so as to avoid the error of fundamentalism and literalistic reading; and encouraging the faithful to express the biblical message in their local cultural media particularly through art forms. In view of this last point, they expressed the need to teach the faithful “different ways of reading, praying and sharing the Word of God.”

31. “A Pastoral Vision for This Decade: Recommendations of the Workshops of the Plenary Assembly: A Synopsis,” *A Renewed Church in Asia: Pastoral Directions for a New Decade*, A Pastoral Report of the Seventh Plenary Assembly, Sanphran, Thailand, January 2000, *FABC Papers* 95: 53–54. See also <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-95.htm>, accessed July 23, 2008.

The Asian image of Jesus demands a shift in our pedagogy. The evocative pedagogy used by the (Asian) Jesus should be preferred to the doctrinal and abstract. Stories, images, symbols, parables, myths, chanting of sacred texts etc., should become the primary medium, as is emphasized in *Ecclesia in Asia* (20), with a clear focus on the experience of life and of God. In this connection, the story of Jesus and the image etched in those stories should get priority. Then, Jesus's God-centered (or Abba-centered) and kingdom-centered life and ministry will become attractive to the Asian heart, in which the inter-religious and the socio-cultural dialogue will better converge.<sup>32</sup>

The same points ought to be stressed as regards the other stories in the biblical canon. These stories, too, are in need of ongoing interpretation from Asian-Christians' viewpoints.<sup>33</sup> The clear Christological perspective of engaging the biblical stories, especially in the New Testament, should not make us forget the countless stories in the rest of the Bible that may not seem to have an immediate Christological bearing but remain important nonetheless. For example, very few remember the story of Ritzpah, Saul's concubine, whose sons were slain for "religious" and political reasons (2 Sam 3:6–7, 21:1–14)<sup>34</sup> or the story of Saul's imaginative and resourceful servant in 1 Sam 9:3–10.<sup>35</sup> These stories could be interesting in Asia where the questions of religion, politics, and violence, as well as poverty and servitude, are part and parcel of daily life in a very pronounced way.

In the same manner, the roles of the other Christians named throughout the letters of Paul – e.g., Timothy, Titus, Prisca and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia,<sup>36</sup> or those who are mentioned only in particular letters, such as Chloe's people in Corinth – might not have been given enough attention since their

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32. Ibid.

33. Jonathan Yun-ka Tan, "Theologizing at the Service of Life," *FABC Papers* 108, available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-108.htm>, accessed May 8, 2009: "To the extent that the FABC's contextual theological methodology is authentic and credible, it should be able to define, articulate and uphold in a holistic manner the *hyphenated* character of all Asian local churches: all Asian local churches are authentically Christian yet truly Asian in every sense of the word, viz., they are always *Asian-Christian*."

34. See Jonathan Magonet, *Bible Lives* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 8–11

35. Ibid., 50–53.

36. Reimund Bieringer, "Women and Leadership in Romans 16," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 44/3 (2007): 221–37, and "Women and Leadership in Romans 16: The Leading Roles of Phoebe, Prisca and Junia in Early Christianity," Part II, *East Asian Pastoral Review* 44/4 (2007): 316–36.

roles are eclipsed by the giant figure of Paul and the stories of the different Christian communities are not adequately considered. The complex relationships of these characters need to be highlighted in Asia, where the sense of community and non-individualistic ways of thinking continue to influence the lives of Christians.

Failure to consider these other stories and the relationships of various biblical characters can deprive our attempts to live out the good news in our own Asian contexts of good or (positively) disturbing examples. Moreover, we need to remember that the ongoing stories of God's dealings with God's people are not only made by the dominant stories and the prominent characters. It is important, then, to also reclaim the messages and the challenges that these other stories impart and the examples posed by the other characters even if they may only be "bit players."

In October 2000, the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC became the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC).<sup>37</sup> It came up with a document entitled "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology. Doing Theology in Asia Today,"<sup>38</sup> which presented important points regarding the role of the Bible in the Church of the Poor. It highlighted the importance of a contextual approach to the biblical text and reaffirmed the significance of the pastoral spiral, validating the importance of "contexts" as one of the resources for theology, along with Scripture and Tradition.<sup>39</sup>

The OTC document explains the following in its discussion of Asian biblical hermeneutics. First, it looks into the importance of reviving ancient hermeneutics such as typology and symbolism, the allegorical, moralistic and anagogic (eschatological) approaches and how they can be harmonized with the historical-critical method, putting them at the service of life in modern Asia.<sup>40</sup> This document likewise highlights the role of the historical-critical method in giving primacy to the literal sense of the biblical texts especially through

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37. Edmund Chia, "Thirty Years of FABC: History, Foundation, Context, and Theology," *FABC Papers* 106, available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-106.htm>, accessed August 26, 2008: "The Office of Theological Concerns (counterpart, perhaps, of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) is charged with explicitly studying specific theological issues often over a period of one or several years, and then making their findings available to the FABC."

38. See Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology, Doing Theology in Asia Today," *FABC Papers* 96 available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-96.htm>, accessed April 15, 2009.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

the service of exegetes so that “biblical hermeneutics in Asia will be assured of having a healthy critical thrust, and the primacy of the literal sense will be upheld.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, the OTC also underscores the function of contextual hermeneutics in biblical interpretation “in relation to Asian worldviews and cultures which are cosmic, Spirit-oriented, family and community-oriented; and in relation to Asian situations in the socioeconomic, political and religious fields.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, people-based hermeneutics such as *Bibliarasal* and AsIPA<sup>43</sup> ought to be encouraged. And in line with the integral approach that the FABC put forward, the OTC emphasized the benefits of the new Asian biblical hermeneutics in terms of hastening the inculturation process, providing a resource for interfaith dialogue, and inspiring contextualized interpretations of the Bible.<sup>44</sup>

We believe that narrative approaches and methodologies can be used with these hermeneutical options. Moreover, it can answer the important challenge posed in this document, that of advancing biblical hermeneutics as a task of all the members of the Church in Asia, not only biblical scholars.<sup>45</sup>

The document, “Church and Social Communication: The Asian Synod – FABC Challenges,” reiterates the need for the “use of stories and parables coming from the Bible.”<sup>46</sup> It also calls attention to the significant challenges of the biblical apostolate in Asia, particularly in view of missionary proclamation, catechesis, preaching, and spirituality.<sup>47</sup> It further underscores the importance of the narrative style: “Here, beside others, the narrative style of many of the biblical books has a special ‘affinity with the religious texts typical for Asia.’ Christian communication has to be narrative communication, if it wants to follow God’s ways of communicating.”<sup>48</sup>

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41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid. *Bibliarasal* is coined from the words *Biblia* (Bible) plus the Filipino words *aral* (study) and *dasal* (prayer). It is a form of Bible study that aims to touch both the mind and the heart. AsIPA stands for Asian Integrated Pastoral Approach.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. See <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-101.htm>, accessed April 15, 2009. It quotes the *Instrumentum Laboris*, No.27, available at, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20021998\\_asia-instrlabor\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20021998_asia-instrlabor_en.html), accessed April 15, 2009.

47. Franz-Josef Eilers, “The Asian Synod and Social Communication: A Documentation,” in *FABC Papers 101: Church and Social Communication: The Asian Synod – FABC Challenges*, available at <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-101.htm>, accessed April 15, 2009.

48. Ibid.

## Continuing the Engagement of the Stories

In summary, we can glean from the preceding discussion that the churches in Asia, as a Church of the Poor and in dialogue with Asia's poor, its religions and its cultures, have the responsibility to continually read and interpret the Word of God in community and in Asian ways. Narrative approaches and methodologies are one of the Asian ways of dealing with the biblical text. We have seen some of the reasons why Asian biblical interpretation like narrative hermeneutics have suffered non-recognition and neglect both from without and within Asia. Because of this, we delved into the need to explicitly recognize this specific way of engaging the biblical stories and recounted some of the efforts that have been made to articulate them.<sup>49</sup> The documents that we discussed attest to a strong desire to let Asian Christians be more familiar with the biblical literature by harmoniously using Asian hermeneutics like narrative methodologies together with the historical-critical methodologies contributed by the West. In so doing, it is hoped that God's Word may be better understood in Asia's multireligious, multiethnic, multilingual, and pluricultural context.<sup>50</sup>

One example we could cite is the Asian and Asian-American Hermeneutics Group of the Society of Biblical Literature. When this group convened on November 23, 2008,<sup>51</sup> to plan future endeavors, it became clear that there are already some published works from the continent itself which

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49. Nevertheless, our preference to narrative style is not meant to discourage the exploration and use of other Asian biblical ways of interpretation.

50. See Tan, "Theologizing at the Service of Life."

51. The Asian and Asian-American Hermeneutics Group met last November 23, 2008, during the Society of Biblical Literature Conference in Boston, MA. The first session, presided by Seung-Ai Yang, had four presentors: Uriah Kim ("Reading the Story of David with Asian Americans"), Ma. Marilou Ibita ("The Lukan Jesus at Table: A Lowland Filipino Christian Reading"), Jeffrey Staley ("Come over and Help Us': Toward a Postcolonial Reading of Biblical Imagery in the WHMS Oriental Home National Fundraising Tour, 1908–1909"), and Julius-Kei Kato ("Discovering the Canon as a Hybrid Persona: Asian-North American Hermeneutical Conversations with Canonicity"). The second session, on November 24, 2008, presided by Lai-Ling Ngan, discussed Benny Tat-Siong Liew's book, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2008), with Yii-Jan Singh, Abraham Smith, Min Hyoung Song, and R. S. Sugirtharajah as panelists..

consider the Asian viewpoint,<sup>52</sup> and that there are more current publications on biblical interpretation from Asian-American perspectives.<sup>53</sup>

When one takes a closer look, one realizes the immense need to continue to explicitly recognize and articulate Asian biblical hermeneutical approaches, both in Asia and by Asians wherever they may be. Stories continue to live in the telling.

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52. Most of the published works that we have seen are parts of collections. See, for example, R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible from the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991). Some of the contributions in this book that seem to use a narrative reading in view of particular concerns from Asia are: George M. Soares-Prabhu (India), "Anti-Greed and Anti-Pride: Mark 10:17–27 and 10:35–45 in the Light of Tribal Values," 117–37; Hisako Kinukawa (Japan), "The Syrophoenician Woman: Mark 7:24–30," 138–55; Sr. Vandana (India), "Water – God's Extravaganza: John 2:1–11," 156–67; Archie C. C. Lee (Hong Kong), "The David-Bathseba Story and the Parable of Nathan," 189–204; Helen R. Graham (Philippines), "A Solomonic Model of Peace," 214–26; and Naim Stifan Ateek (Israel), "A Palestinian Perspective: The Bible and Liberation," 280–86. There is also a script of a skit done by an Asian Group of Women, "An Asian Feminist Perspective: The Exodus Story (Exodus 1:1–22, 2:1–10)," 255–66, which shows narrative creativity in the different scenes, the presentation of characters, and the mini-plots: (1) the house of Moses – Jochebed, Miriam, Susannah, Hannah, Shiprah, and Puah; (2) the market place – Jochebed, Susannah, Leah, Shiprah, Puah, Soldiers; (3) the palace – Princess Zephartiti, Leah, maidens; (4) beside the river – Princess Zephartiti, Leah, five maids, Miriam, baby in a basket, three soldiers, Jochebed; (5) Pharaoh's palace – Pharaoh, sentries, Princess; (6) Princess' palace – Princess, Leah, Maids. In the same collection, there is a section on people as popular exegetes. One finds the following contribution from professional and volunteer community workers in Solo, Indonesia, "The Miraculous Catch," 444–46. See also Archie C. C. Lee, "Biblical Interpretation in Asian Perspectives," *Asia Journal of Theology* 7 (1993) 1: 32–39. Segovia's and Tolbert's *Reading from This Place* includes the following readings from Asia: Naim Ateek, "Pentecost and the Intifada," 69–81; Hisako Kinukawa, "On John 7:53–8:11: A Well-Cherished but Much Clouded Story," 82–96; Archie C. C. Lee, "Exile and Return in the Perspective of 1997," 97–108; George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Laughing at Idols: The Dark Side of Biblical Monotheism (An Indian Reading of Isaiah 44:9–20)," 109–31; and Elaine M. Wainwright, "A Voice from the Margin: Reading Matthew 15:21–28 in an Australian Feminist Key," 132–53.

53. The examples that we have by Asian-American authors are single-author books. See, e.g., Uriah Kim, *Decolonizing Josiah: Toward a Postcolonial Reading of the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2005), and his *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story: A Postcolonial Reading*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 22 (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2008). There are also published works from England on Asian perspectives. See Kwok Pui-Lan, "Finding Ruth a Home," *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 2005), 100–21 and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Pre-colonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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